



Celebrating Sunshine Week in San Diego

By Mayor Jerry Sanders and City Councilmember Donna Frye

Sunshine Week provides us all with the opportunity to celebrate and recognize the importance of open government, or “sunshine,” laws at all levels of government. These laws provide the public with a voice in how local, state and federal governments make decisions and conduct business on behalf of the people they are elected to represent. They are also the basis for the broad legal protections we enjoy to access information from our government.

During the recent mayoral election, we both recognized that many of our city’s problems were made worse by a culture of secrecy that existed within our city government. We both agreed that it was long past time to start being brutally honest with the public about the true state of the city, especially regarding our finances.

We also recognized that a good place to start was the annual budget because the taxpayers have a right to know how their money is spent. In the past, the annual budgets did not represent the “real” amount of money needed to adequately fund all city departments. This year, we will change that and pass an honest and easy to understand budget that represents the true cost of city services. Moreover, we have established a budget schedule to ensure that the public has a real voice in the process.

One of the most important laws that citizens have at their disposal is the Ralph M. Brown Act. The purpose of the Brown Act is very simple - to ensure the accountability of government officers and to enable citizens' oversight of government agencies by keeping official decision-making processes as open as possible to public knowledge and participation. The Brown Act’s preamble states, *“The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created.”*

An informed and politically active public is a crucial part of the democratic process and helps ensure that government officials remain accountable to the people they serve. The Brown Act protects the public’s right to know and its ability to meaningfully participate in government.

The City of San Diego has started a process to change how it conducts the public’s business. A series of ordinance changes took place in March 2004 that addressed closed session meetings, including the requirement that all closed session meetings would be transcribed; that detailed descriptions of all closed session items be provided to the public; and that the public be provided

the opportunity to speak on all closed session items. The ultimate goal was to ensure that closed sessions were the exception to the open meeting requirements, not the rule.

Additionally, a *Right to Know* ballot measure was approved by over 80 percent of the voters in 2004. This ballot measure was written with the belief that the public has a right to a government that is open, responsive and accountable to the people it serves and that the public, not the politicians, should decide on the people's right to know. The *Right to Know* ballot measure allows the citizens of San Diego to know what their government is doing, how decisions are made and what information was used to make those decisions. This helped create a more open government, by requiring public officials to make it easier for the public to access information and obtain documents. The burden is on the government to show there is a real and legitimate need for secrecy before any requested information is kept secret.

We are committed to working together to make city government open, accessible and transparent to the people of San Diego, not just during Sunshine Week, but every week of the year. For more information about the budget schedule, city council meeting dates and times and how you can participate go to <http://www.sandiego.gov>.

Jerry Sanders was sworn in as mayor of the San Diego in December 2005. Donna Frye is the Councilmember for the Sixth Council District of the City of San Diego, which includes the communities of Clairemont, Kearny Mesa, Linda Vista, Mission Bay, Mission Valley and Serra Mesa. She has served on the City Council representing District Six since 2001.